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ABSTRACT

A study examined the commonalities that "voracious" readers share, and how their experiences can guide parents, teachers, and librarians in assisting children to become self-actualized readers. Subjects, 25 adults ranging in age from 20 to 67 years, completed a questionnaire concerning their reading histories and habits. Respondents varied in educational attainment, occupation, and types of materials read, but all were classified as prolific and active readers. Through a series of protocols, subjects relayed personal accounts of their introduction to and life-long obsession with the written word. Results indicated that (1) all subjects had positive reading self-concepts, and their reading histories were essentially devoid of negative experiences; (2) avid readers were concerned about having something good to read next after they finished a good book; (3) the "music of enthusiasm" did not lend itself to words; and (4) learning to read was as natural as learning to speak. (Contains 27 references.) (RS)

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ED 375 394

THE SELF ACTUALIZED READER

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-five adults, ranging in age from twenty years to sixty-seven years, completed a questionnaire concerning their reading histories and habits. The respondents varied in educational attainment, occupation, and types of materials read, but all were classified as prolific and active readers. Through a series of protocols, each reader relays a personal account of his introduction and life-long obsession with the written word. The study attempts to arrive at commonalities that these voracious readers share, and how their experiences can guide parents, teachers, and librarians in assisting children to become self-actualized readers.

THE SELF-ACTUALIZED READER

PURPOSE

Educators study dysfunctional readers at great length, but pay scant attention to what we will call self-actualized readers. Educators know these readers are out there reading voraciously and enjoying it; but they do not ask them to share their rich reading experiences. The present paper studies these self-actualizing readers detailing the personalized experiences which set them apart from the ordinary.

Our concept of the self-actualized reader is based on an analogy to Maslow's theory of self-actualized persons (Lowry, p. 178). Maslow focused his attention on those rare persons who were on the verge of or who had achieved psychological health. These persons were his self-actualizers. By analogy "self-actualized reader" seem the most appropriate term to apply to those readers who have made reading an integral part of their lives, who read voraciously and with regularity.

This is not to imply that self-actualized readers are self-actualized persons. Self-actualized readers may be self-actualized persons, but that is not relevant to our study.

This study seeks to describe exceptional functioning in reading. How do our top readers go about reading and what do they experience?

DEFINITION OF TERMS

At the start of the study, we viewed the self-actualized

reader as someone who reads continuously and makes reading an important part of his or her life. Data makes it clear that our self-actualized readers see themselves as having the following qualities: habitual, voracious, addicted, in many cases indiscriminate, though discriminating in others. They also describe themselves as constant, avid, purposeful, eclectic. All of our self-actualized readers freely choose reading over most other activities save major responsibilities like work, school and home.

In view of these self-descriptions we feel that this group of readers has been overlooked.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Reading research has primarily focused on the problem reader - those with disabilities. Reasons for this include the adage "if it's not broken, don't fix it," as well as the fact that reading scholars tend to gravitate towards accurate measurements with tools of readability and such. Other factors detected in this investigation include the problem of measuring attitudes or feelings (Athey, 1985). Several studies did touch on the relationship of self-concept and reading (Holmes, 1969). This study focused primarily on the negative self-concept and how it ultimately affects the one's attitude toward reading and school. Studies researching children's self-concept as related to reading groups were found in abundance (Eder, 1983 and Williams, 1973.) Still other authors offer relationships between poor self concept and reading ability (Henderson, 1965, Fenimore, 1968.) Other mention of self-concept and reading call upon Erik Erikson's stages of development.

As is apparent, much of the above research seems to concentrate on school age children. Because this group is easier to sample, more available for longitudinal studies, and is easier to obtain a control group, researchers focus on these subjects. Our study will veer from this already well studied group, and focus on a group that is rarely studied. Adult readers have been scrutinized much less well, and the evidence of their reading is rather sketchy. Several studies have summarized changes among readers from childhood to adulthood, so far as reading content is concerned (Purvis and Beach, 1972). Still other authors report the type of reading adults do and classify it into three different areas or reasons : escaping, searching for meaning, and practical applications (Appleyard, 1990.)

As evidenced by the above review, much of the research concentrates on school-age children. This group is easier to sample, more available for pre- and post-testing, more suitable for longitudinal studies, and easier to match with a control group because their experiences are less varied. Our research focuses instead on a neglected group - the adult reader. The literature on this topic includes studies documenting changes in reading habits and content from childhood to adulthood (Purvis and Beach, 1972); classification of the type of reading adults do: escaping, searching for meaning, and practical applications (Appleyard, 1990), and the amount of time spent each day in reading (Jolly, 1978). Still other researchers select narrow adult populations, perhaps residents of nursing or retirement homes, to interview about

reading habits (Check and Toellner, 1984; Ngandu, 1980). An ambitious study conducted by the Educational Testing Service interviewed 5,067 adults across a broad spectrum of socioeconomic levels. This study attempted to determines what adults read (Sharon, 1973-4). Still other adult-oriented reports measure attitudes toward book buying and library usage (Gallup, 1965).

Several studies border on our study. Carlsen and Sherril interviewed a large number of readers by asking for a reading "autobiography." (Carlsen,1988). Carlsen, a reading instructor in a large midwestern university, required his students to answer a number of protocols resulting in a two page self-report on their reading interests and habits prior to taking his course. These students, ranging in age from 18-21, and enrolled in a degree program to become either teachers or librarians, recalled various events which related to their lives as readers. This collection of autobiographies parallels our research but is more narrowly focused, since the subjects were still in adolescence and do not have the extensive adult experiences our subjects share.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Subjects

In our study we selected adult readers who were either self-proclaimed or nominated as self-actualized readers. We started with the few readers we knew personally and then asked them if they knew any avid readers. It was a simple technique of inquiry that yielded a sample of 32 readers, 16 males and 16 females. We included only subjects who were 18 years old or older. To give us

a comprehensive perspective of exceptional reading, we sought out subjects with as wide a variety as possible in a small sample.

Most of the readers were born and raised in various parts of this country: Montana, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Georgia while one reader was Canadian. One born in Montana spent his third through 18th years in Paris and Germany. Most were college graduates, including six with doctorates in a variety of fields, and a few with only a high school education. Among the occupations represented were farmer, reporter, housewife, secretary, college teacher, public school teacher, horse rancher, case worker, government worker, computer programmer, college student, machinist, counselor. They ranged in age from 18 to 68.

Questionnaire

A search of the literature for a suitable questionnaire was fruitless. The one questionnaire for adults we did find, the Adult Inventory of Reading Interests and Attitudes (AIRIA) (Stronks, 1982), did not meet our needs since it concentrated on the type of reading adults do. Therefore, we created a questionnaire which contained 13 protocols including self-descriptions, beginnings, circumstances, people connections, reading histories, choices, meaning and impact in their lives, and television versus reading. The full questionnaire is available to interested scholars.

Procedure

We used most of the questionnaires in an interview setting which encouraged readers to talk freely but with the focus on the questions. A tape recorder was used to record the interviews which

were then transcribed on a disk for future processing. The tape reordering proved productive in collecting our data. Each interview took about one hour allowing enough time to record an adequate sample of reading histories and for elaborating on personal experiences regarding any question. We were dealing with rich reading histories of 13 years to more than 60 years, so we were careful to allow our respondents to range freely so as to capture a meaningful sample of their reading experience.

In half a dozen cases the subjects prepared their own written answers. We noted no significant differences between their replies and those of the interviewees.

The responses were grouped according to protocols for commonalities and uniqueness and then checked to see that the headings we had selected were in the data. Two questions emerged: How were the readers alike? How were they unique? In order to answer these questions, we analyzed the self- descriptions, motives, preferences, strategies, and accounts of their reading histories.

RESULTS AND COMMENTS

Self Descriptions

The descriptor words that self-actualizing readers apply to themselves are intriguing: " voracious," "avid," "love to read," "read quite a bit from the time I had learned to read," "I really get into books, I won't even hear ... I shut off the world,...I become that character," "I'm right there but I don't become the character," "contact sport...struggle with books," "discriminating,

inveterate," "addicted," "eclectic," "versatile, prolific at times," "spastic, undisciplined, binge," "devour books...they get eaten alive as it were".

Our self-actualized readers become intensely involved in their reading as if possessed or addicted to a positive life process. While the self-descriptions cover a wide range, our readers are very serious about their reading. One can say that they go about their reading like football players go about the superbowl. They are fully functioning and fully alive when they are reading material of their choice.

MOTIVES

Their motives tell even more than their key descriptive words and phrases and can be divided into several classes: pleasure, escape, relief from pain and other stress, highly active curiosity, a desire to know more about a person or subject of intrinsic interest, work related information, power. This last term, power, encompassed everything from developing competence in a wide variety of fields to how-to-do-it to physics or philosophy.

Pleasure: All our readers find a great deal of pleasure in reading. A philosophy professor said, "Reading felt good. It rewarded me in my central nervous system. I just had experiences with words that some people do with color or with parties. Words and reading were its own reward for me." A woman said, "I read for enjoyment and relaxation not to expand my mind, although I do some of that." Another woman said, "I like reading better than most other activities." Typical of our readers was this comment, "The

greatest blessing you can have is loving to read."

Escape: Reading to escape was a motive shared by most of our readers. One reader said, "I escape the stresses of work by reading something totally unrelated to work." Another said, "I was a very sickly child and reading was a way of distracting me for the pain. When I was sick in bed and could not sleep, I would read 24 hours a day."

Active Curiosity: Curiosity was a powerful motive in our readers. One said, "Now I read anything serious, hard, funny provocative. I read about two books per week, mostly fiction, plays, poetry, philosophy, history, theory. Also I read Scientific American cover to cover every month." Another said, "I've read in just about every field that you can name because basically I'm a very, very curious fellow." Another reader commented, "This spring I developed a curiosity about the twelfth century and read two books on Henry II, one on the Angevin Empire and Richard the Lion Hearted and his despised brother John, one on William the Conqueror and his Norman Wars for background and one on Louis of France and his son Philip for perspective. These I counter balanced with two slightly ribald books by Dan Jenkins, and business a book by Harvey Mackay."

Hunger: One man said, "The meaning of my life and the answers that I needed were more in terms of the books I read... The reading of philosophy was the food for my soul." Sometimes there is an insatiable desire as in the case of a retired government worker who reports: "When I went to work during the war there happened to be

an Austrian working in the office next to us .... and he started teaching me German on the lunch hour....he brought a book of poetry and read....they were very, very beautiful poems and sometimes we read from that. As soon as the war was over, he helped me go through the University of Zurich. It was taught in German. While in Zurich, I studied Italian and German. But later I went and studied in Italy and I read and took literature courses there. Later I was in Spain and in my job they needed somebody who could read Spanish. So with my knowledge of Italian, I could read quite a lot of Spanish, and I got the job. They sent me to Spain. My level of reading really transcends language. I was so interested in literature that I was drawn to reading it."

Work Related: One man said, "The fact that I read up to fourteen languages has of course opened the doors to many other worlds. It meant I had a well stocked mind. It meant that as a teacher I was able to put together a subject matter before me with all the other subject matters that bore on it. As a result, every course I taught was by its very nature an interdisciplinary course." A woman said, "I use reading to keep up on the latest research in education the best I could." Another reader said, "When I became a mother, I read many 'how-to' manuals." A professor stated " Much of my reading is necessary for me to remain current in my academic disciplines."

Power: There is wide agreement about the power of reading and one reader commented: "I came to read for information in my last years for power, since I discovered that information was

powerful: it puts you one up on the other guy." A woman explains empowerment another way: "From 1965 to 1969 I was a lobbyist for Federal Relations Division of NEA in Washington. My Job was to read and digest each day's Congressional Record, Federal Register and any proposed bills dealing with education, welfare, or related fields. I would then produce both a daily and a weekly publication based on that reading. When I first became a runner in 1977, I read everything I could to help me become a healthier, faster runner. When I began running marathons, I devoured Jeff Galloway's books about planning, training for and competing in marathons. These were very helpful. When we first started SOAR (local running club), there was very little printed material available on putting on races so I gathered as much info as I could and I wrote a manual based on my reading and interviewing. When I became a mother, I read many 'how to' manuals. Later, I read a lot about managing a hyperkinetic child. I have enjoyed Wayne Dyer, Dick Lederer et al about life management and George Sheehan about joy. I read history to understand society. I'm currently interested in the Civil War. I am interested in nutrition, current events, and the environment and I pursue these interests via reading. I have hosted exchange students from Japan, Germany, Holland and Monaco, and, to prepare for their arrival, I read quite a bit about these countries. I can't imagine how non-readers deal with life."

Though all of our readers read for pleasure and enjoyment, their various motives make each of them unique. While their interests and curiosities take them along different paths, they all

share a passion for the activity itself. Indeed, as we saw over and over again, reading is an integral and important part of their lives rather than just one skill among others. This has implications for the teaching of reading. First, the teacher must be sure that he or she appeals to a wide variety of motives in attempting to move students. Here as elsewhere, the uniqueness of the individual must be respected. Finally, since it is possible that only passionate people can be turned into passionate self-actualizing readers, the school cannot at this stage of our knowledge be asked to produce self-actualizing readers.

WHEN AND HOW THEY LEARNED TO READ

On the face of it, this question seems to ask for no more than dates and methods; in fact, it involves the cognitive and affective aspects of becoming a habitual reader and then a self-actualized reader. Only one third of our readers reported learning to read in school. Others credit mothers and often both parents for helping them learn to read, generally before they attended schools. Fathers and siblings as well as grandparents and other relatives contributed where families were large and many of them were active readers.

One male reader said, "My father was a voracious reader and many nights we would read quietly in the front room. He would then put me to bed with a story." In one case, a retired man reported that his road to the love of reading began with an elementary school friend. He reported, "A friend who memorized stories he read or heard would tell us the stories. This was very intriguing,

making me want to read my own stories so I would not have to wait for him to tell us the stories." In another case, a housewife stated, "My grandmother was a great reader, but she never encouraged me to read. My mother was a news reader....I don't think my mother ever read a book. I don't remember us having books at home....I don't remember reading much as a young child.... As a young teenager, I got hold of The Substitute Friend. I think it was the first novel I ever read and I was hooked....I don't know how I came across this first book."

A retired man recalls, "My father got me started with nursery rhymes....My teachers taught me phonetics (phonics) in kindergarten." Another retiree said, "Teachers helped my interest with stories."

A woman professor said, "I think that my mother must have taught me to read, although I seemed to have picked it up rather easily and quickly....My mother definitely influenced my valuing books. She read to me, took me to the library and praised me for reading....While my mother taught me to read, school was a detriment....I can understand how children who had not developed an appreciation for reading outside of school would certainly not find one in it....As I got older, my mother became less of an influence on my reading. When I was in the seventh grade, our school district started an advanced program for gifted children which I was put into. We had an ambitious reading list, which often went beyond my capacity to understand. Looking back, I have tremendous respect for the people who choose our books." A

woman teacher said, "My mother read to me as a child. I don't know that I read before actually going to school, but I had a teacher in first grade, a little, tiny four foot eight nun who just was an inspiration and she would read to us every day. She would tell us wonderful stories about what learning to read will do for us and how lucky we will be and that everybody in this class was going to be a reader. I remember her vividly telling us that, and this was many years ago." A woman counselor said, "Both parents read and encouraged daily reading by providing good books and seeing that time was allotted for reading every day."

The great prominence given to loved ones helps explain why these self-actualizing readers experience reading as pleasant. It also points to what should be a major thrust of the first efforts to teach reading. The loving and pleasant atmosphere of the home needs to be replicated in the school on a much wider scale than at present for the student is to embark on a life long journey of enjoyable and profitable reading.

Many of our readers found it easy to recall how they began to read; for others it was a hazy memory. For example, one person said, "I suppose in first grade. I don't really remember." Most of our readers learned to read before entering school. Some of those who reported learning in school at one point in the interview contradicted this elsewhere with statements like, "I was reading before I went to school." A few avid readers credit teachers for the inspiration which hooked them on books. In the home setting, reading developed before or with the learning of words and meanings

of words. If the mechanics of reading were learned in school, and few of our subjects mentioned this, the love of reading was most frequently nurtured in the home, especially by mother.

Most of our subjects could actually read words by four or five; one reported learning at two; two readers caught on to reading in their third year of life; and the remaining few were seven or eight before they caught on to reading.

In theory, learning the mechanics of reading and becoming hooked on books are both necessary in evolving into a self-actualized reader. In reviewing our data, it is apparent that many of our readers, at least two thirds, developed the habit of reading, if not the total commitment that they later did, before entering school. In most cases, as young children they were surrounded by parents, grandparents, relatives, siblings, or even friends and neighbors who read regularly and had books available to them. By contrast, a few subjects in our study were brought up in homes which were devoid of books or parents who read. These were the ones who became readers because of school and friends. None of our subjects mentioned learning the mechanics of reading. This may indicate that reading like listening and speaking came so naturally that they were not consciously aware of the learning process. The naturalness of reading for the self-actualized reader is so apparent in our subjects that it raises some questions about when a child is ready to read.

WHEN THEY BECAME SELF-ACTUALIZED READERS

Though most of our subjects began reading before school, we

cannot conclusively say when they became self-actualizing readers. In some cases, they achieve this status quite early; for others it occurred in the teen years; in a few cases after high school.

Here are some of the quotations about the beginning of this status of reading. One man said, "I used to skip school sometimes in order to finish books. In high school I would just skip out after homeroom and go downtown to the library. The past-time is habit forming." Another man said, "I remember one occasion when I was in the high school library. It was a Sunday and I wanted something to read. I started walking down the rows of books and it struck me that, as I was looking at these books, there was literally rows and rows of books that I had read. I was reading more books then they would receive....That event right there struck me. It gave me such of feeling of accomplishment, I was in awe of myself."

In these cases and in many others our readers cross the line from merely being habitual readers to becoming self-actualized readers. Their reading has purpose and direction. For example, one self-actualizing reader said, "I would see something or hear about something in school and want to learn more about it." Almost anything could spark their interest to inspire a search in the library or in some source of reading material.

SOURCES OF BOOKS: ACCESSIBILITY AS A FACTOR

As noted above, the availability of books and reading material was a significant factor in the development of our readers. A retired professor said, "There were books in every room. There

were books piled in the corner of the kitchen, books piled in the toilet, books on every step of the house." A woman office worker said, "My mom would take us to the library on Saturdays and we would spend a long time picking out our books. We never had a limit on the amount of books that we checked out."

Networking with other readers was related to sources of reading material and was a key factor as our subjects became independent readers making active choices about their reading.

A male teacher said, "At school I had friends who also read and we would trade or take turns with library books. Today, I get books in much the same way. I have reader friends and we discuss and trade books. My book buying is curtailed somewhat because they are a luxury with three and almost four children. Despite that fact, it has not curtailed my reading at all. I use the library and rely on trades and borrowing." A woman professor said, "My sister and I read books in parallel as children. As adults, we still give each other books as gifts....My friends tend to be readers; not only do they read books but they enjoy words." A woman student said, "I had a few reader friends, but not many. The books I have were given to me from [sic] my parents and grand parents." Another said, "Most memorable associations are mostly of reading a book and discussing it at length on a one-to-one basis." A housewife said, "The library was not close by. I had a cousin who liked to read and I remember how we spent our summer vacation: we would sit on the glider and just read anything we could borrow from the neighbors. She had a fair amount of children's books."

SACRIFICES FOR READING

In answering the question about what was given up because of reading, one woman said simply, "TV." Another said, "I didn't feel deprived." A teacher said, "I sometimes go in to work very tired because I stay up late reading." A retired man said, "If I get into a story, I like to keep reading instead of sleeping." Another man said, "I feel the big activity I have given up is sleep." A woman said, "I do not feel that I have given up anything." Another woman said, "Nothing." One woman said, "Perhaps I should have socialized more as a youngster. I was more academic than social for a long time and I missed some real experiences in favor of vicarious ones."

Most of our readers felt that nothing important, with the exception of sleep, was really given up. Reading was a highly valued part of their lives and freely chosen.

TV AND READING:

Our subjects agree that there was no contest when there was a choice between reading and TV. One man said, "TV viewing is passive, much like pablum. You can watch it while reading a book (reported often). But most of all it doesn't allow for the use of fantasy. I also use reading to enter into a fantastic world, reading was the material which I used to create it. I still live inside my head, so my friends tell me, and reading is often wonderful for furnishing the house inside my head. TV does not do that." Another man said, "TV is a young medium."

As television evolves and merges with advanced technologies,

it will be interesting to see how self-actualized readers use it.

WHAT READING MEANT TO READERS:

For the self-actualized reader, reading was food for the soul, the source of meaning, a natural and necessary human activity, a means for satisfying deep needs. In short, it was central to their lives.

One woman puts it simply and clearly, "I was taught early that there was a book for every need." One retiree states, "Reading lets me do in books what I cannot do in real life." A male professor said, "Reading has given me years of relaxation, pleasure and knowledge about life in general. Life without reading would be tantamount to a permanent trip through Dante's nine rings of hell." A retired woman said," I just couldn't figure out how I could live without reading. It's second nature to me. I mean I've gotten so much pleasure out of it, so much enjoyment, I think I've learned an awful lot and it just makes you think more than you would ordinarily. It is just one of the greatest joys of my life, I just love it." Another woman said, "I can't imagine not having access to my kind of reading."

A retired professor said, "It meant that I lived in a bigger world than other people." A woman states, "I'd be lost completely without it. I mean that truly. It has been a means to survive in many troubled times." Another woman said, "Everything that I do has a reading aspect to it." A woman counselor said, "In a general sense I feel reading is my vital link with the world and cannot envision being deprived of it at any time in my whole life."

CONCLUSIONS

Our self-actualizing readers share much in common but remain utterly individualized in their reading. This finding was similar to a conclusion Maslow made about his self-actualizing people. He states, "....self-actualization is actualization of a self, and no two selves are altogether alike.... Our subjects had very much in common, as we have seen, and yet, at the same time, were more completely individualized, more unmistakably themselves, less easily confounded with others than any average control group could possibly be."(Lowry, p 200)

All the subjects have positive reading self-concepts, and their reading histories were essentially devoid of negative experiences.

Avid readers seemed to be quite concerned about having something good to read next after they have finished a good book. One said, "There's a let down after I finished a good book." Some tend to collect or stockpile books. Another had a box of Wesley's theology books to read. Another woman accumulated over a thousand books in her library. A retired computer expert, who now spends more time watching TV than reading, still had stacks of books in his living room, even though he may never read them. He seem to kept them around for comfort.

The music of enthusiasm does not lend itself to words. Statements like the following only give a hint of the passion involved. "I couldn't imagine a world without books." This was a common feeling among the readers in the study. One reader has two

bookcases in his bedroom, one on each side of his bed. He said, "These are my books. I've read each one at least twice, some four times." For our readers, living without reading would be like not having food for their bodies. Books are food for their minds.

Another example of the enthusiasm was, "Reading was just part of the environment. It's hard to describe...it was like breathing, you didn't even stop to think about it." This may be the key significance of this study: reading in an environment of books and readers is just as natural as speaking.

Learning to read, for our self-actualized readers, seems to be as natural as learning to speak. That is, learning to read may be a natural aspect of learning one's native language. When nurturing parents or adults are constantly talking and listening to their growing and developing children, it is no wonder that readers learn to speak so well. By the same token, it is no wonder that many, if not most of our voracious readers, learned to read naturally and easily at home. For the self-actualizing reader, the skills required for reading are like those needed to speak and listen to language. The reading itself, however, a reward in itself, drives them to immerse themselves in this particular medium of communication.

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